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AUTHOR Allen, Sheilah M.
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ABSTRACT

For a teacher educator, a 2-year leave in Australia inspired her to replicate in Canada an Australian penpal project in which preservice elementary teachers wrote to school children who answered the letters and eventually met their penpals. Her preservice secondary teachers, English majors, wrote to eighth-grade students taught by one of her ex-graduate students. The hope was that both groups of students would find a context for writing to real audiences for real purposes. The suburban middle school which the youngsters attended contained computer labs and is networked. An additional area of interest was to learn about middle school aged students and to have the university students "connect" with the younger students. Compatibility was crucial, and the matching of penpals proved to be extremely effective. Letters were picked up and dropped off with regularity. Time was allotted during class for reading letters. In the education class, letters often served as discussion starters. Both boys and girls, and men and women, professed to have enjoyed the project and learned from it. While they did not learn what was expected in terms of literacy, the letter exchange did promote understanding and friendship, in spite of individual differences which existed, regardless of gender or ability. (Contains nine references.) (NKA)

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Sheilah M. Allen

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# MIDDLE SCHOOL PENPALS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: PROJECT PENPAL

ED 395 310

As a teacher educator, I have incorporated in my teaching activities I learned from Australian colleagues during a two year leave Down Under. Probably this influenced me to explore the possibilities of replicating Pen Pals: A Gift of Writing (Latham & Morriss, 1993), an Australian project in which preservice elementary teachers wrote to school children who answered the letters and eventually met their penpals. I saw an opportunity to have my preservice secondary teachers, English majors, write to grade 8 students who were taught by an ex graduate student of mine. I hoped to give both groups of students a context for writing to real audiences for real purposes. It seemed to me that much could be learned by all involved. With the new technologies available to us, I was interested in discovering whether young writers would take advantage of these or would prefer the more traditional approach to letter writing. The suburban middle school which the eighth graders attended is an example of the "high tech." schools of the future, with computer labs in each of its four wings; in addition, each classroom has a minimum of one computer. The school is networked and has facilities superior to those on campus.

I also wanted to learn about middle school aged students and to encourage my students to connect with them. Irvin (1990) described the range of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual characteristics of middle grades students. She recommended that teachers provide these students opportunities for physical movement in the classroom, for social interactions, for both concrete and abstract thought, and for development of confidence and emotional stability. Project Penpal could encompass these goals through the shared reading of letters, the writing of letters, and the support of a penpal. In Crowhurst's (1993) seminal work in Canada, she notes that "Personal letter-writing can motivate students and provide useful practice and important learning if they are matched with a pen friend and regular exchanges are established and maintained." (.p. 55) Her experiences closely parallel mine.

A review of relevant literature resulted in my having high expectations of the outcome of the project in terms of literacy and affective dimensions. Koeppel and Mulrooney (1992) described a program for American preschool children, in different states, in which sharing of artifacts (photographs, drawings, stories) promoted

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understanding and valuing of different subcultures. Letters were exhanged between first grade children and preservice elementary teachers (Briggs & Kostelnik, 1994) resulting in interpersonal bonding and the promotion of the young children's emergent literacy. Another project involving written exchanges between eight and nine year old at-risk readers and teachers--both preservice and inservice--in a graduate reading course (Bromley, Winters & Schlimmer, 1994) resulted in changes in children's attitudes, behavior, and literacy learning. Of the many studies involving ESL students in letter exchanges, two were noted. Hadaway (1990) described a project in which university students and bilingual ESL students exchanged letters, with the latter gaining motivation by having role models for language development. Similarly, Latino/a high school students wrote letters to penpals in university (Garcis-Vazquez & Vazquez, 1994). Benefits for the high school students included enthusiasm for reading and writing as well as improved literacy skills. A global writing project involving computer technology (Beazley, 1989) gave students an opportunity for letter exchanges. Benefits included motivation, improved literacy and keyboard skills, and cultural awareness. Thus, the project seemed to offer the experience of putting literacy theory into practice.

In preparing for PROJECT PENPAL I realized that matching students with compatible penpals would be crucial. I developed an inventory to find out about students' backgrounds and interests (see Appendix). The grade 8.class consisted of 12 girls and 14 boys aged 13 to 15. There was a range of abilities with almost half the students honor roll achievers while a few had failing grades in language arts and social studies, taught as Humanities. There was one Native boy who had a Native aide and one boy with an attention deficit disorder. Prior to meeting them, I received permission from the principal, the parents, and the students to carry out the project, copy the letters, and eventually publish them. The teacher administered the inventories which I collected for matching.

The university students were enrolled in a course on Writing and Reading Processes, an appropriate context for writing to real people for real reasons. These students were in third or fourth year, ranging in age from 22 to 50 (average of late 20's). They brought a range of life experiences including international travel to the course and all had, and continued to work at, a variety of jobs. In order for the seven men and 12 women to match the grade 8 numbers, some adults wrote to two students. After I gave them the inventory, I

analyzed what individuals from the two classes had in common and paired them up. Characteristics which seemed important were: foreign language background (a few spoke Spanish), pets, hobbies, sports, music, and travel. The matching of penpals proved to be extremely effective, with the pairs having many more similarities than I was initially aware of.

The university students wrote the introductory letters, telling about themselves, explaining how enthusiastic they were about the letter exchange, and asking for information about their penpals. For example,

> *I am thirty-two years old, I can't believe I got so old so fast! I live in V. and was actually born here, but I have lived in many differant (sic) places. I have a three year old daughter. We live with a cranky black cat called Uncle Boo, who attacks me when it rains. He hates getting wet. My special interests are painting, sculpture, ceramics and absolutely anything to do with the theater. I like all music and would like to hear about what music you enjoy.*

I delivered the letters the following week and observed while the grade 8's read and shared their letters. They were keen to write back immediately; many went to the computer lab. while the rest wrote by hand. Without any instruction about content or format, they tended to use the letter they had received as a model and responded to the questions they had been asked. From a girl,

> *Hi, my name is S. & I was talking with Dr. A. She said you really like soccer, me too. The reason I am handwriteing (sic) this is those stupid computer won't let me in to my file so there one example high tec school . . . Tip #1 on being a teacher --If your (sic) not funny don't try to be but since you like Seinfeld you must have good taste.*

My routine was to pick up or drop off letters at the school every Monday. Both the teacher and I allotted class time for reading letters; she sometimes provided class time for writing back while my students wrote on their own time. Letters could be hand or computer written since students had access to computers either at school, at home, or at university. Late letters were occasionally faxed although this was not encouraged. In my class the letters often served as discussion starters, raising questions such as how to encourage a penpal to be less concerned about the appearance of a letter or how to respond to a penpal's personal trauma on the death

of a friend. The letters built a foundation between penpals as this journal entry shows.

> *Today I wanted to write down what I have been learning through my letters to T. I remember grade 8 so clearly, it was one of my most impressionable years. I look forward to T.'s letters so much, and when I do not recieve (sic) one, I really am concerned. This person I have never met or even seen has really affected me. It must be the nature of a letter. It is such an expression of caring. A phone call takes hardly any fore-thought or planning or work. Also a letter is concrete, a physical thing that can be stored and cherished. I am excited about meeting T. but at the same time I have really enjoyed writing to this girl who doesn't know me and having our relationship become comfortable within the framework of the correspondance (sic).*

Penpals wrote to each other every second week from September to March. The letters reveal differences of gender and ability. Girls' letters were longer, more detailed and personal. They shared experiences, thoughts, and feelings. The boys tended to write about concrete objects like mountain bikes or events like holidays. The following contrasting introductory letters are not atypical (the first from a boy, the second a girl).

> *I like Star Trek, riding horses, British comedy (like Black Adder and Red Dwarf), drawing, clay, reading, Medievel (sic) stuff. I'm not fond of running in gym. School is fun and interesting. The teachers I am with are interesting. I am 13 years of age. I have bin (sic) to New York state, Ontario, Alberta and Quebec with my parents. But I am content to live here along (sic) time.*

> *My name is E. and I'm thirteen and turning 14 in February. I really hate school but that's a pretty depressing thing to talk about. It must be great living on your own I wish I was. My Mom's really annoying and overprotective but that's not the half of it. . . . It's great that your (sic) getting married it must be nice to have someone you love.*

The following are later letters by a boy and a girl, revealing that communicative ability changed little over the course of several months.

> *I might be going skiing this weekend with my parents. We would be going up to Mt. Washington. I have only been there once with my friend who lives in Comox. We were up there on*

*the holidays. I think I might actually snowboard if we do go up.*

*Correct me if I am wrong but I would describe you as bubbly, great sense of humor, happy, creative and most importantly easy to get to know. Until I met you I thought nobody was that cheerful. You always keep your spirits up. When you hurt your lumbar you were in pain but a smile was on your face.*

Both boys and girls, and men and women, professed to have enjoyed the project and learned from it. Clearly what they learned was not what I expected in terms of literacy, but the letter exchange did promote understanding and friendship, perhaps more important for the adolescent writers. Five of the pairs continued writing after the project ended and others talked on the phone and got together. In the last project letters I asked the students to reflect on the value of the experience. These responses from a boy and a girl speak for themselves.

*From writing theis (sic) letters I've learned better writing skills. I've also learend (sic) some different books to read, and I have a new frined (sic). I've seen new faces and new people. S. this has bin (sic) a very good experience and I will never forget it. I aperceat (sic) the frequently (sic) of the letters you wright (sic) my (sic). I hope that when this is over you and me will still wright (sic).*

*It meant alot (sic) to me for you to know that this was a great expierince (sorry for spelling). I don't know about you completley, (sic) but we seem to have adjusted well to writing and knowing each other. I don't mean to use the word adjusted like we were put in a cage for a science experiment but to be able to become friends so quickly, for me was a great thrill and to be able to talk like we had known each other for a while without the age difference. I confess at first I thought oh great an adult will treat me like I'm really really young. I thank.you for treating me as an aquainntence/ (sic) friend.*

What did Project Penpal reveal about middle school students? First, that individual differences existed, regardless of gender or ability. This was evident in students' preference for writing letters by hand or on the computer. Half chose the former and half the latter. Interestingly, those who wrote by hand often decorated their letters with drawings or stickers while the others generated

letterheads using computer graphics. Second, that students took the project seriously, making the letters a priority; despite sickness, fatigue, and other assignments, letters were done on time. The value of authentic writing to a real audience for real reasons was confirmed. Penpals were nonjudgmental in terms of correctness of the mechanics of the letters. They encouraged communication--content was what was important. Finally, through the interactions of the letters, genuine sharing and caring occurred. At a time when many adolescents feel isolated and alienated, these students had a supportive adult who was interested in their welfare. Project Penpal may not have lived up to the studies described in the literature in terms of literacy skills. It did, however, promote exchanges between penpals which provided them with insights and experiences. As one girl wrote asking for her penpal's home address, *"I am really glad we can still write back and forth because it will give us a chance to learn more about each other."*

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